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ABSTRACT

A study sought to determine: (1) what factors had made a difference in student achievement on the Havasupai reservation in Arizona after the Havasupai had contracted for control of their education system, and (2) whether these phenomena repeated in other Native American schools which had contracted for control. The fact that Native American schools have fared poorly when standardized achievement tests have been used as measures of effectiveness led to a concentration on the definition of variables that separate effective from ineffective schools. The study compared achievement scores of Chapter I students in four conventional Bureau of Indian Affairs elementary schools (under nonlocal control) with those of three contract elementary schools (under local control) where native language and culture were part of the curriculum. Results, which covered school years from 1980-81 to 1983-84, indicated no difference in any achievement test area. However, the independent variable of native language of the teacher did lead to significantly higher scores in reading and language for students whose teachers were native speakers of the first language used. These results suggest that a combination of local control and instruction in native language in Native American schools can make a difference in student achievement. (SKC)

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NATIVE LANGUAGE PROMOTES STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

A paper presented at the

Native American Conference

Lake Superior State University

October 17, 1987

by

Dr. Lois A. Hirst

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Abstract

Native Language Promotes Student Achievement

In recent years an effort has been made by many researcher to define the important variables that separate "Effective Schools" for "Ineffective Schools." Lists abound. Consistently the standardized achievement test is the measure used to define an "Effective School." Forced to work within this definition, Native American Schools have not fared well.

Local control and community support appear as variables on most lists of "Effective Schools." Local control has long presented an issue in Native American education. Proponents of local control believe that improved achievement will result from high-quality education programs which incorporate local language, values and culture. PL93-638, the Indian Self-Determination Act, provided a vehicle for Native American control of their own education in the late 1970's.

This study was an effort to determine what had made a difference in student achievement on the Havasupai reservation after they contracted for control of their education system, and to determine whether it had happened elsewhere. A study was made which analyzed standardized achievement scores of Chapter I students in seven elementary schools (three contract and four conventional BIA schools) over a four-year period.

There are two conclusions to be drawn from the study. First, the native language of the teacher makes a difference when we measure achievement on standardized tests and second, we need to increase the number of native language teachers in schools that have bilingual children if we are to raise student achievement scores. Local control and the use of the native language in native american schools can make a difference.

NATIVE LANGUAGE PROMOTES STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Researchers in recent years have made an effort to define the important variables that separate "Effective Schools" from "Ineffective Schools." Edmonds (1979) defined the characteristics of "Effective Schools" as 1) a clear school mission 2) frequent monitoring of student progress 3) high expectation for student achievement 4) a safe and orderly climate and 5) strong educational leadership. Tomlison (1980) added 1) efficient use of classroom time and 2) using parents or aides to help keep children on task. An article in the May 1980 issue of Phi Delta Kappan added fostering high levels of parental contact and involvement. All these studies assume that one can differentiate effective schools from ineffective schools. Consistently standardized achievement tests such as the California Achievement Test (CAT) or the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) are the measures used to define "Effective Schools."

Until only recently Native American communities have remained unable to incorporate the "Effective Schools" variables into their schools because of external Bureau of Indian Affairs control of their education system. The BIA defined the school mission, not tribal groups; while the BIA frequently monitored students progress it did not always share results with parents; the agency held no high expectation for student achievement; its boarding schools often did not provide a safe or orderly climate for students; it offered weak educational leadership; and actively discouraged parents and community members from involvement in the

schools. The variables identified in "Effective Schools" research assume one important aspect of American education--that of local control. Local control and parental and community support are indigenous to American education. Research showns these two variables to be essential ingredients in an "Effective School." Gaining local control; however, has long presented a problem to Native American education.

Forced to limit their measure of success as "Effective Schools" to student achievement test results and having no local control, Native American schools have not fared well. They are caught up again in a measure that is foreign to their societies and cultures.

Research on student achievement in Bureau of Indian Affairs Schools and Bureau contracted schools indicates that 75% of the students are scoring below grade level in basic academic skills. Considering that in the "average" school in the United States only 50% of the students would score below grade level, it's quite apparent that Indian students in the BIA and contract schools have some serious academic problems. This is further exemplified by the fact that test results for all Bureau and BIA contract high schools show that the average 12th grader is only at a 8.8 grade level in language arts, 9.2 in math and 8.5 in reading.

Native American proponents of local control believe that improved achievement will result from high-quality education programs which incorporate local language, values and culture. PL93-638, the Indian Self Determination Act, provided a vehicle for Native American control of Native American education in the 1970's.

Native Americans are told "Get your education--that's the only way to survive" and "Remain Indian--that's the only way to keep your respect."

How does one remain Indian and get an education in today's American school system? This is a dilemna all Native Americans face.

In the mid-1970's, I assisted the Havasupai in gaining local control of their schools. The Phoenix Area Office of the Bureau of Indian Affairs had had little or no experience with PL93-638. The Havasupai, a tribe of only 400 individuals located in the isolation of the Grand Canyon and of little significance to the BIA, asked to contract for its educational services. Days of negotiation and the intervention of the American Association on American Indian Affairs led the Havasupai to success. The Havasupai designated me Principal and charged me with developing a comprehensive education system. The Tribe and I shared a common vision: The Havasupai system could take a place among the best in the state, if not the country. The characteristics of our school system were the same as those stated earlier from the research on "Effective Schools." We had a clear school mission; we monitored the student progress several times a year through achievement testing; we had high expectations for our students; the school had a safe and orderly climate; we had strong educational leadership; we redesigned classroom schedules to make more efficient use of time; we had parents and aides in the classrooms to help students, in fact, we had an extremely high level of parental involvement in the school. We believed, as did other proponents of local control, that improved achievement would result from high-quality education programs incorporating local language, values and culture. PL93-638 gave us the means we needed to prove we were right.

With funding from a Title VII grant, the long process of writing the Havasupai language began. We needed books and materials in the native language. We hired bilingual school personnel. Every classroom had a native language speaker as a teacher or teacher-aide. Many of these were parents. The school offered instruction in the native language, Native American literature and Havasupai history to non-native teachers and to the local staff. Title VII classes taught not only the local language, but values and culture. Parents became active in school affairs and we made an attempt was made to center many tribal activities in the school. By the second year we saw a significant rise in achievement scores.

Armed with all this background and experience, in 1984 I began a study of seven elementary schools in what the BIA calls the Phoenix Area. I selected three contract schools and four conventional BIA elementary schools and analyzed standardized achievement scores of Chapter I students in math, language and reading on the California Achievement Test over a four-year period covering school years 1980-81 through 1983-84. The study looked at variables of local control such as teacher/teacher-aide tenure, administrative tenure, length of time as a contract school and the primary language of the teacher/ teacher-aide and compared contract schools with conventional BIA schools.

My expectations were that contract schools would show more growth and higher achievement scores due to the local control. Contrary to my expectations, the only significant difference appeared when the independent variable of primary language of Chapter I teacher/ teacher-aides appeared. Teacher language affected language scores and, to a lesser degree, affected reading scores; it had no affect on math scores. This would imply that primary language of the teacher does make a difference.

The data showed that if the Chapter I teacher was a speaker of the local language, the student scored higher in language and to some degree in reading. As we know, both language and reading skills are related, while math is considered an analytic skill less dependent upon language.

Analysis of the data further showed there was no significant difference between tribal contract schools and conventional BIA schools in any area. The late 1970's and early 1980's trend in BIA education may be responsible for this. As more tribes opted for contracting education, there was a movement in BIA controlled schools to allow parents and community members more involvement in the education of their children. School boards made up of parents were established. The school mission was set by the parents and Title VII and Chapter I programs in these schools began to hire more teacher/teacher aides who had fluency in local language. The BIA controlled schools in this study were all local reservation schools and drew upon the local community. Many of the teachers/teacher-aides were local tribal members and spoke the native language.

Even further analysis of the data revealed that students in classrooms where teachers were native speakers scored 4.35 points higher than the grand mean in reading and 4.53 points higher in language. Students in classrooms where teachers spoke English as the first language scored .59 points higher than the grand mean in reading and were .72 points below the grand mean in language. When a language other than the local language or English was the primary language, students scored 9.59 points below the grant mean in reading and 7.98 points below in language.

The study supports those proponents of local control who believe the incorporation of native language into the schools makes a difference in student achievement; however, local control alone did not make the difference. Aspects of "Effective Schools" research account for some of the difference.

There are two conclusions to be drawn from the study. The obvious conclusion is that the native language of the teacher makes a difference when we measure achievement by standardized tests. Instruction in ones one language increases test scores. This conclusion is consistent with other studies on bilingual education, and should be included in the "Effective Schools" research for Native American schools.

The second conclusion to be drawn centers around local control and the "Effective Schools" research. As was stated earlier, local control is assumed within the "Effective Schools" research. Native Americans often have not been afforded this mainstay of democracy. Native Americans must gain local control, the opportunity to develop their own curricula, establish their own school mission, become involved in their own children's education and draw upon the research that is available. The intuition of local control proponents has proved correct. The incorporation of local language, values and culture are important to an educational system. Local control, and importantly, the use of the native language in schools together with "Effective School" research, may be an answer to the question of "How does one remain Indian and get an education in today's American school system?" Whether schools remain directly funded by the BIA or whether they are contracted to individual tribal groups, is no longer the most important factor. Local control of school boards, the hiring of local teachers/teacher-aides and the incorporation of tribal values are the most important factors.

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